AMARNATH

The shrine celestial



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FOREWORD

The Himalayas have a special place in the cultural and spiritual life of India. The snows of the Himalayas have drawn men towards them not only for their exquisite scenic beauty but also because of the sanctity that attaches to them. Besides being the source of the holy Ganga and many other life giving rivers, they have also been the abode of some of our most important shrines which are visited by lakhs of devoted pilgrims every year from all corners of the country and abroad.

Among the Hindu shrines which are situated in the Himalayas, Amarnath is unique in many ways. Here the sacred Shivalingam is formed on the full-moon day of **Shravan** out of pure ice as if to signify the oneness of Nature and God. Unfortunately, due to a wrong interpretation of secularism and the corresponding deterioration in our moral and spiritual values, there has been an increasing ignorance and apathy among our educated people, especially the younger generation, towards our cultural heritage including these shrines. It is to interest and acquaint people with the beauty, cultural as well as religious importance of these shrines that the Dharmarth Trust has planned a series of monographs on shrines in Jammu and Kashmir, the present monograph on Amarnath being the first. I sincerely hope that the people for whom these monographs are meant will seek the opportunity to visit Amarnath and feel for themselves the holy thrill of having a glimpse of the ice Shivalingam, besides the joy of adventure that a trek in the Himalayas always provides.

KARAN SINGH

PREFACE

The true purpose of religion is to awaken the divinity in man, or, in other words, self realization. And what place could be better for the purpose than the grottos and glens in the sky kissing mountains of Kashmir, where, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, men are apt to forget their worldly desires and petty pursuits and give themselves up to meditation.

The enchanting beauty of the Himalayas has always been a source of inspiration and ineffable joy to the seekers after divine knowledge in our country. It is, therefore, natural that Kashmir should possess innumerable shrines and places of pilgrimage associated with gods and goddesses and saints and seers. The celestial valley does in fact possess one of the three most hallowed shrines in the Himalayas, namely, Amarnath.

For a devout Hindu a visit to the holy cave of Amarnath is as auspicious as to any other shrine in the country. But situated as it is in the bosom of a high mountain, it cannot be visited at any time. The pilgrimage is undertaken every year in the month of **Shravan** when the devotees have **darshan** of the holy ice-lingam in the cave on the full-moon day, **Poornamashi** (usually in August)

The origin of this holy trek is lost in the dim mists of antiquity. There is mention of the holy **tirtha** in the time of a ruler of ancient Kashmir who, according to one version, ruled about a thousand years before Christ.

It is not difficult to imagine how risky and arduous the pilgrimage must have been in olden days. All the same, a number of brave devotees undertook it, as such pilgrimages are believed to confer great merit on the devotee and rid him of his sins of commission and omission. But today, like other pilgrimages, the Amarnath pilgrimage is also no longer difficult and dangerous ; nor does it take long to accomplish. But as it involves a climb up to a height of over 4000 metres above sea level, those interested do need the help of a good and reliable publication to make their holy trek easy, enjoyable and rewarding. This is what the present publication offers to do.

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Kashmir - God's Own Land

Kashmir is God's own land and the people of the celestial valley have peopled all its prominent features—its mountain peaks and promontories, its rivers and springs, its brooks and lakes, with gods and goddesses, or invested them with divine associations. The result is that Kashmir is a land teeming with shrines and places of worship. In the words of the native historian, Kalhana, who wrote in the middle of twelfth century A. D., there is here not a spece as large as a sesamum seed that has not a shrine or place of worship on it. An earlier text, **Nilamatapurana**, usually ascribed to the sixth century A, D; describes Kashmir as "a holy region possessed of all the sacred places". It adds, "There are sacred lakes of the Nagas and the holy mountains ; there are holy rivers and highly sacred temples and also the hermitages attached to them".

Not only that; Kashmir is known the world over for its distinctive brand of Shaivism which, according to the knowledgeable, is among the highest in the religious philosophies of the world. Most of the shrines in the celestial valley are dedicated to Shiva or his divine consort, Uma or Parvati.

The Shrine Celestial

The best known and the most prominent shrine in the valley is the Shiva shrine of Amarnath. Situated in the bosom of a sky-kissing mountain, at a height of about 3,900 metres above sea level, the shrine is a spacious cave in which the object of worship is not one of marble or stone. The sacred image in the mountain grotto is a self-formed **ice-lingam** which waxes and vanes with the moon. This makes the holy cave a unique shrine in the whole world.

According to popular belief, the ice **lingam** in the cave attains its maximum height on **Shravan Poornamashi** i. e., the full-moon day of **Shravan** (usually August). This is the day of annual pilgrimage. On this day thousands of devotees from all over the country, as also a large number of tourists from foreign countries, converge on the sacred cave for **darshan** of the unique **ice-lingam.**

The cave is situated at a distance of 142 kms. from Srinagar. The first 96 kms. upto Pahalgam are motorable ; but the remaining 46 kms. have to be traversed on foot or ponies. The non-motorable part of the journey is done in stages.

Stages enroute

Pahalgam is the base camp for the mountain trek. The other three stages are: Chandanwari, Wavjan above Sheshnag and Panchtarni.

Pahalgam : Pahalgam is the most important stage on the route to Shri Amarnathji. For it is here that the pilgrim has to equip himself with his requirements for the arduous mountain trek And it is here that he can profitably avail of the assistance of the Yatra Offficer, the chief functionary that the State Government appoints to be in overall charge of the arrangements for the pilgrims on their way to the shrine. He has his office just below Pahalgam at a spot known as Nunwan It is he who allots ponies and labourers for carriage of camp kit, etc. The Yatra Officer, usually an officer of the rank of Deputy Commissioner, accompanies the pilgrims to the holy cave.

Pahalgam is a delightful spot and the most popular tourist resort in the whole of Kashmir, outside Srinagar. It is beautifully located at the junction of two raging streams coming from Liddarwat, 22 kms. away in the north-west and Sheshnag, a mauntain lake 27 kms. away to the north. The combined streams, known as Liddar, flows through the verdant vale of Pahalgam, situated at a heigh of 2,130 metres amidst fir-covered mountains.

Chandanwari : The next stage Chandanwari is 16 kms away, at a height of about 2,900 metres. Chandanwari is a pent-up opening among the hills where the streams coming from Sheshnag and Astanmarg meet. Chandanwari is a picnic spot famous for its snow bridge, the first on the route to Amarnath. It can be approached by jeep also but the pilgrims do the journey on foot. The trek to Chandanwari involves a gradual ascent, mostly

along the bank of the stream coming down from Sheshnag.

Pahalgam, has two interesting spots for the devotees, the ancient temple of Mamleshwar with its clear water, on the mountain side, across the Liddar, and Ganeshbal, a huge **sindoor**-smeared rock in the middle of the stream. A similar rock lies in the middle of the Sindh river near Gund on the Srinagar - Sonamarg - Baltal route to Amarnath.

Sheshnag-Wavjan : The ascent to the next stage, Sheshnag, is steep upto the top of the Pissu hill or Pissu Ghati. Thereafter one has to trudge along a spur for about 5 kms. to reach the mountain lake, Sheshnag. But the pilgrims camp at Wavjan, a windswept camping site which overlooks the milky green lake, set against a massive triple - peaked, glacier strewn mountain. For the devotees the peaks represent the Hindu Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva). Wavjan (3,755 metres) commands a fascinating view of the mountain lake at its feet and the surrounding snow covered ranges. It is at a distance of about 13 kms, from Chandanwari. Sheshnag is at an altitude of about 3,700 metres.

Panchtarni : The next stage Panchtarni, also at a distance of about 13 kms, is reached after crossing the towering Mahagunas pass, 4,300 metres. The ascent to the top of the pass involves a stiff climb. After crossing the pass, the route winds down to the plain of Panchtarni, a smiling little valley amidst the mountains which exudes peace and calm. It is crossed by a number of streams coming from glaciers on the mountains in the east. Five of these which are bigger than the rest, have given the place its name - the meadow of five streams.

From Panchtarni (3,650 metres) the cave is only about 6 kms. away but it is an uphill route for half the distance. Thereafter the path is plain but partly covered with frozen snow over which one has to walk. The cave is about 100 metres higher up in the mountnin-side. But before going up to enter it, the pilgrim has a bath in the sacred Amaravati which issues from the snows on the adjoining mountains and the cave.

The Holy Cave

The cave is an enormous grotto in the gypsum rocks of the Amarnath mountain rising to a height of about 5,100 metres. The cave itself is 3,900 metres high. Water drips continually from the ceiling. Part of this water collects in two depressions at the back of the cave and gets frozen into ice-slabs of big size. An **ice lingam** rises up on a platform in the south-east corner where the ceiling slopes up. This is the Amarnath. The self - formed ice - image is known to have been about 3 meters high at the maximum; though at times the height is no more than a metre or so. During the inter-calary year (**Malmas-Banamas**), the image is very low and sometimes non-existent. The ice-slab immediately to the left of Amarnath is said to be the image of His divine consort, Uma or Parvati, and the one further on that of their son, Ganesh. In late August, 1979, a friend-a Conservator of Forests, found a number of smaller **ice-lingams** by the side of the huge **ice-lingam** of nearly 3 metres in height in the cave.

The ice-lingam is not a stalagmite for when on **Amavasya** it vanishes, no sediment of any kind is left on the ground.

Before going into the cave, or when in it, the pilgrims smear themselves with chalky clay taken from rhe bed of the Amaravati stream or from the sides of the troughs at the back of the cave. The pilgrims welcome the waterdrops falling from the cave ceiling as benediction from Lord Shiva. Similarly they welcome the hill pigeons that appear overhead, above the cave, on the day of the pilgrimage

CHHARI MUBARAK

From Pahalgam the pilgrims' procession is headed by the silver mace, called **Chhari Mubarak.** The **Chhari,** believed to be Lord Shiva's protecting symbol for the **Yatris**, leaves Srinagar ten days before the actual day of the pilgrimage **Shravan Poornamashi** and reaches Pahalgam six days later, after night-halts at Pampore (known for its saffron fields), Bijbehara, Mattan and Aishmukam. It makes two days halts at Mattan and Pahalgam. From the famous tourist resort of Pahalgam it is carried at the head of the pilgrims' procession. Most pilgrims however, go to Pahalgam, direct in buses which are available for the purpose at Pathankot, Jammu and Srinagar.

Years ago, the **Chhari** would start from Amritsar where the great Sikh guru, Guru Arjan Dev, had donated a plot of land for the purpose. Earlier still, it started from a village in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. The venue was shifted to Amritsar due to adverse political conditions. In early Dogra rule the venue was shifted to Srinagar.

The pilgrimage to Shri Amarnath Ji is now accomplished in less than a week but not long ago it took a full fortnight to do it. Even today **Chhari Mubarak**-the silver mace of Lord Shiva, takes a full fortnight to reach the sacred cave from Srinagar and back. After **puja** at the hill shrines of Shankaracharya and Hari Parbat in the city, the **Chhari** leaves on the holy trek on the fourth or fifth of the lunar fortnight after **puja** at Dashnami Akhara in Srinagar. The puja is now-a-days performed by Dr. Karan Singh, Sole Trustee of Dharmarth Trust. The Kashmir Chief Minister or other high dignitary of the State Government is also present at the ceremony. The former Chief Minister

Sheikh Mohd. Abdullah, attended the ceremony a number of times. So did his son and successor, Dr. Farooq Abdullah, in August, 1983. He visited the cave shrine also, going there by helicoptor. A record number of 35,000 people are believed to have visited the sacred cave last year. These in cluded about 10,000 sadhus and one thousand foreigners. About 7,000 devotees are stated to have visited the shrine by the Sonamarg - Baltal route in 1983.

The **Chhari** is accompanied by a large number of sadhus. As they leave the **Dashnami Akhara** in a procession in the evening, hundreds of spectators line up the route to wish them **bon voyage.** The **Chhari** halts for the night at Pampore (the ancient Padmapora). Next day it is taken to Bijbihara, which in ancient times, contained a celebrated temple of Shiva Vijayeshwara. The village was known for high scholarship and can today also boast of two massive temples of Shiva, housing **ekedasha - rudra** (eleven **Shivlings** on a common **pranali**) besides Vijashwra.

The next stage for **Chhari's** halt is Mattan or Bhavan, known for its large springs and sun temple. Enroute it visits the shrines at Anantnag and Gautamnag. Not far from Mattan lie the imposing ruins of the ancient sun temple- Martand, which Kashmir's greates ruler, Lalitaditya, built in the eighth century A. D.

From Mattan or Bhavan, where the Hindus offer **shradhas** to their deceased during the inter-calary month and take the holy dip in the sacred springs, the **Chhari** moves to Aishmuqam where there is a fine camping ground, adjoining a popular Muslim Shrine. Not far from the place is a sacred shrine of Ragnya Devi, as at Tullamulla, north of Srinagar. The Devi shrine is located at a place known as Lokutpora.

The base camp for the mountain trek, Pahalgam is reached on the tenth of the lunar half of **Shravan.** After observance of the **ekadashi** fast at this tourist resort, the sadhus, as also the other pilgrims, leave for Chandanwari early in the morning of **dwadashi** or the twelfth day of the lunar fortnight of **Shravan,**

Reference to the other stages of the journey has already been made. After **darshan** of the sacred **lingam** in the cave the **Chhari** returns to Panchtarni. The next stop is Chandanwari from where the pilgrims return to Pahalgam on the second of fhe dark half of **Bhadoon** or **Bhadrapada** but a large number of them return direct to Wavjan from where they go to Pahalgam next day.

In earlier times, the returning pilgrims skipped Mahagunas, Wavjan and Sheshnag and went direct to Chandanwari from Panchtarni by the now discorded and risky Saskut route. They would also skip Pahalgam proper, Mattan and Anantnag by going to Nawdal (near Avantipur) from Mamleshwar (opposite Pahalgam) over the Budmor ridge.

EXHILARATING TREK

Amarnath pilgrimage is a most exhilarating mountain trek which combines piety with pleasure. The journey to the cave lies through some of the most picturesque scenery in the world. The azure Sheshnag, set against the background or snow-capped peaks and glaciers, is an unforgettable sight. So also are the camps at Chandanwari, Wavjan and Panchtarni where canvas towns spring up suddenly on arrival of the **yatra** and as quickly vanish at the first streak of the morning light on the morrow. The glow of hundreds of fires, stoves and torches, the ochre-robed and ash-smeared sadhus, and fhe **yatris,** men, women and children in their various dresses, and caravans of ponies carrying the pilgrims or their luggage, long remain in one's memory The hymns which the **yatris** sing and the slogans that they raise such as the melodious refrain **'Har Har Mahadev Shambu, Kashi Vishwanath Gange'** which they chant in chorus on the last leg of the journey from Panchtarni to the cave, haunt one's memory long after the pilgrimage is done.

An ecstatic calm descends upon the devotee as he enters the holy cave. Inside, he is apt to forget all mundane thoughts of the self and feels himself to be in the presence of the Divine. As Dr. Karan Singh has observed ; "for a while one glimpses the lovely face of nature in its pure, undesecrated majesty ; the torrent of time slackens, problems and strifes of life pale into insignificance and one is lost in deep meditation " Mrs Margaret E. Consins found the cave "a powerful, spiritually magnetised centre" whiie the poet Mrs. Percy Brown described it as "hoary Himalaya's blest retreat". Swami Vivekananda remarked ; "I had never been to anything so beautiful, so inspiring".

The uniqueness of the Amarnath shrine has attracted to it many luminaries from time to time, apart from hundreds of non-Hindus, and, in our own time tourists from many lands. Kashmir's greatest Muslim ruler, Sultan Zain-ul-Abdin is stated to have visited it in the 15th century A. D. Guru Nanak also visited the holy cave during his visit to Kashmir. Swami Vivekananda who visited it in 1898 A. D. had one of his most profound mystical experiences there. Stating this, his eastern and western disciples record that he almost swooned with emotion. He said that Shiva Himself had appeared before him and granted him the grace of Amarnath, "namely not to die till he himself chose to do so". Swamiji and his entourage, including Sister Nivedita, went by boat up to Anantnag wherefrom they went on foot to Achabal and Martand. Here they joined the other devotees on pilgrimage. They had **darshan** in the cave on August 2.

The saintly Maharaja Partap Singh visited the cave three times and saw for himself what difficulties and hardships were encountered by the pilgrims. He, therefore, had the route improved considerably and got a number of sheds erected at Pahalgam, Chandanwari, Wavjan and Panchtarni. That was a time when the road was not motorable upto Pahalgam. In fact Swami Vivekananda travelled to Kashmir from Rawalpindi in a tonga and from Srinagar to Anantnag by boat.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru tried to visit the sacred cave from Matayan in Ladakh, but couldn't make it. Shri Morarji Desai, who also became Prime Minister of India, has visited it by the traditional route. So also King Mahendra of Nepal and Dr. Karan Singh, scion of the ruling Dogra dynasty who later became the first Governor of Jammu and Kashmir State.

SONAMARG—BALTAL ROUTE

The holy cave of Amarnath can be visited from Srinagar in one day also. This is through the beautiful Sindh valley which rivals the Lidder valley in beauty and charm. This in fact, is the most convenient route to the shrine, but the devout prefer the traditional route via Pahalgam. The Baltal route is 110 kms. with only 16 kms to cover on foot or ponyback. (The Pahalgam route is 142 kms and of these the last 46 kms have to be done on foot or ponyback). The stages on this route are Ganderbal, 21 kms from Srinagar ; Prang, 35 kms ; Kangan, 40 kms ; Gund, 60 kms ; Sonamarg, 84 kms ; and Baltal, 96 kms. At Gund there is a huge rock in the Sindh - as at Ganeshbal below Pahalgam in the Lidder - which is regarded as a representation of Ganesha. It too is heavily smeared with sindoor.

Raference has been made to the Panchtarni streams. These flowing west constitute the head-waters of the Sindh which is augumented with the waters of Amaravati and issuing from the holy lake Gangabal. The route to Amarnath lies along the banks of the Sindh upto Baltal at the foot of the Zojila pass, 3450 metres, the gate-way to Ladakh. Therefrom the route lies along a steep ridge till one reaches the other route from Panchtarni above the confluence of that stream with the Amaravati, issuing from near the sacred cave itself. The route beyond Baltal is risky after mid summer when the snow bridges on it are likely to give way due to the melting of the snow. Swami Vivekananda, at first tried to go to Amarnath by this route but found it impossible. He left on July 10, 1898 A. D., but returned to Srinagar after five days as he found the route impracticable ; the summer heat had melted some of the snow bridges.

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Unfamiliar Approach Risky

The holy cave of Amarnath can be approached from across the Zojila also but the routes are difficult and dangerous. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru attempted one of the routes in 1916 A. D. when, after his marriage, he spent some weeks in the mountains of Kashmir. He has left—in this **Autobiography**, an interesting account of this unsuccessful trek. At one place - he thinks it was Matayan - he was told that the sacred cave was only eight miles away. Though an enormous mountain, all covered with ice and snow, lay between, Panditji decided to make the attempt. His companions meekly acquiesed and a small party left their camp at about 3450 metres, with a local shepherd as their guide. Panditji writes; "We crossed and climbed several glaciers, roping ourselves up, and our troubles increased and breathing became a little difficult. Some of our porters. lightly laden though they were, began to bring up blood. It began to snow and the glaciers became terribly slippery; we were fagged out and every step meant a special effort. But still we persisted in our foolhardy attempt. We had left our camp at four in the morning and after twelve hours almost continual climbing were rewarded by the sight of a huge ice-field. This was a magnificent sight, surrounded as it was by snow peaks, like a diadem or an amphitheatre of the gods. But fresh snow and mists soon hid the sight from us. I do not know what our altitude was but I think it must have been about 15,000 to 16,000 feet, as we were considerably higher than the cave of Amarnath. We had now to cross this ice-field, a distance probably of half a mile, and then go down on the other side to the cave. We thought that as the climbing was over, our principal difficulties had also been surmounted, and so very tired but in good humour, we began this stage of the

journey. It was a tricky business as there were many crevasses and the fresh snow often convered a dangerous spot. It was this fresh snow that almost proved to be my undoing, for I stepped upon it and it gave way and down I went into a huge and yawning crevasse. It was a tremendous fissure and anything that went right down it could be assured of safe keeping and preservation for some geological ages. But the rope held and I clutched to the side of the crevasse and was pulled up. We were shaken up by this but still we persisted in going on. The crevasses, howeveo increased in number and width and we had no. equipment or means of crossing some of them And so at last we turned back, weary and disap pointed, and the cave of Amarnath remained unvisited".

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has been quoted at some length as a warning against foolhardy attempts to reach the cave over untrodden paths.

Twelve pilgrims and 12 ponies lost their lives in August, 1970 when the pilgrimage itself had to be abandoned at Wavjan due to inclement weather. Nearly 500 pilgrims and about as many ponies are reported to have been killed in 1928 A. D. for the same reason.

Some decades back Amarnath cave was visited only on the annual pilgrimage day of **Shravana Poornamashi**. But now several hundreds of devotees visit it on **Ashad Poornima** also ; in fact the cave can now be visited from July to the end of October. But then one has to make all the arrangements on his own. Some people who can afford it, or are highly influential, prefer to visit the shrine outside the yatra period when there is no rush of pilgrims. King Mahendra of Nepal did so ;

so did Shri Morarji Desai. Among the spiritual leaders who have also visited the shrine within living memory, mention may be made of Swami Ram Tirth and Swami Ramdas. The former felt such an exaltation after his visit to the shrine that he gave vent to his feelings in a beautiful poem in Urdu. The eminent Kashmiri Shaiva sage, Swami Vidyadhar is known to have meditated in the cave for several weeks. He is believed to have subsisted on a little **suttoo** daily. Bhagwan Gopinathji, another eminent Kashmir saint, is also known to have visited the cave.

Amarnath is the subject of many a poem and tale in Kashmir. A popular folk - tale, **Sodi Voni** relates how a great **Shaiva-bakhta** followed the Lord, from Pahalgam, to salvation. Parmanand, one of the greatest saint-poets of Kashmiri language, has written a highly regarded allegorical poem comparing the Amarnath pilgrimage to the pilgrimage of the soul from mundane existence to eternal salvation.

Other Amarnath Shrines

The origin of the Amarnath pilgrimage is shrouded in the hoary past. Kalhana has a solitary reference to it in the reign of King Nara who ruled in the fourth century A. D. According to Kalhana's chronology, Nara ruled from 1008 B. C. to 1048 B. C. This shows that Amarnath cast His spell on the people of the valley from dim antiquity. And for those who could not undertake the arduous mountain trek, they had shrines of the Lord nearer home. Some of them exist to this day and are frequented by devotees in large numbers on the occasion of **Shravana Pooranmashi.** The best known among these lesser Amarnath shrines is situated at Thajiwara, a village about 8 kms from Bijbihara on the Bijbihara-Langanbal Pahalgam road. Here also there is a cave from whose ceiling water drops fall on some stone Shivalings. The water that collects in the trough below is led into a neighbouring channel in which pilgrims bathe. A similar shrine, known as Chandrasom, is to be found above the village of Sali beyond Mattan Chandrasom is nearly 22 kms. from Mattan, and about 9 kms. from village Sali. Yet another shrine of this kind exists in the mountain north-east of Bandipore. (Bandipore is on the bank of the Wular lake, 56 kms away from Srinagar). The shrine designated Dhyanishwar, (about a dozen and half kms. from Bandipore) is visited by some hundreds of devotees on **Shravana Pooranmashi**. Amarnath is believed to reside also in a cave on the mountain above Drugamulla. The cave, situated in the Varnau forest is about 60 kms from Sopore. It is known as Amrun. The rocks containing the cave are made of gypsum and yield Amar Babooti, as the more famous cave of Amarnath. In fact the whole of the forest above Drugamulla (ancient Durgamulla) was known as Harawant (Shiva's forest). This has

left its name to the spring and village of the same name near Sopore.

Shravana Pooranmashi is a very hallowed day in Kashmir when worship to Lord Shiva is offered at numerous shrines, other than the ones designated Amarnath. Three of the most prominent of these are also situated on mountains. And of these the most popular and the easiest is the Shiva. temple atop the Shankaracharya hill in Srinagar. The other, Harshishvar, rises above the village of Khunamoh about 15 kms. to the south-east of Srinagar. The shrine is a cave in which there is a **Shivaling**. The cave ceiling seems to be carved into the shapes of a number of snake-heads out of which water drops fall on the stone image There are images of Ganesha and a **Panchmukhi** (five faced) **Shivaling** also in the cave. The cave, as also the promontary on which it is situated, is difficult of access. There is another cave higher up which contains images of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva). Khunamoh (Khonomusa) is a very ancient village which in Buddhist times housed a famous Buddhist monastery.

The third important Shiva shrine frequented by devotees on **Shravana Pooranmashi** is Mahadev. This is on a peak of the mountain of the same name rising above the famous Dachigam National Park and the Harwan water reservoir, north-east of Srinagar. It is believed that the first great Shaiva sage of Kashmir, Vasugupta found the **Shiva-sutras** inscribed on a rock at the foot of the Mahadev mountain which rises to a height of 3,900 metres.

Hindus of Kashmir keep a fast on the occasion of **Shravana Pooranmashi** and offer worship to the Lord in numerous Shiva temples. **Puja** is

also offered in their homes to **Shiv-panchayatan** i. e. Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, Kumara and Nandi images, made of soft yellow clay brought for the purpose from some sacred hill, such as the Shankaracharya in Srinagar

Another Amar Nath shrine is believed to be just outside the rampart of the Hari Parbat hill fort, on its south-west, above the **Mahaganesh** and **Jwalla Devi Shrines**. But it is not much frequented.

Budha Amarnath

Amarnath has cast such a powerful spell on the people that shrines to the Lord have come up outside the valley also. Thus we have two small shrines on the road from Jammu to Srinagar at Makarkot, beyond Ramban, and near Khooni-nallah. But a much better known Amarnath shrine is situated in Poonch on the other side of Pir Panchal mountain enclosing the valley on the west.

The shrine is about 2 kms. above the village of Mandi which itself is about 22 kms. south of Poonch town. But unlike the historic shrine in Kashmir it is not situated on a high mountain. It lies in a lovely glen at the foot of a high mountain which is covered with snow for a number of months in the year. It is easily accessible by road.

The Makarkot shrine, about 3 kms. from Ramban, is known as Budha Amarnath and the one between **Khooninalla** and Ramsu is known as **Gupteshwar Mahadev**. The Amarnath shrine in Poonch, also known as Budha Amarnath, is a temple. It lies at the head of a massive **chakmak** rock about 90 metres above a stream, flowing nearby. The sacred image is in fact a part of this white rock. There is a spring near the shrine in which the devotees bathe.

The pilgrimage to Budha Amarnath also takes place on **Shravana Pooranmashi**. As in the case of the more famous Kashmir shrine, the pilgrims procession to Budha Amarnath which starts from Poonch town, is led by a **Chhari** (Shiva's staff) after it has been duly worshipped at the local **Dashnami Akhara**. Hundreds of people gather to witness the ceremony and accompany the pilgrims for some distance. The **Chhari** leaves on the thirteenth

day of the lunar half of **Shravana** and reaches the shrine the next day. The trek back begins after **darshan** and **puja** on **Pooranmashi**. But most of the devotees now do the pilgrimage in one day, **Pooranmashi itself**. For a full description of **Budha Amar Nath** and other shrines in Jammu, the reader may refer to the author's book **"Jammu : Shrines & Pilgrimages"**

As in the case of the Kashmir shrine, a visit to Budha Amarnath is believed to be very rewarding, especially for barren women and the unemployed.

Amarnath Mahatamya

Every important **tirtha** or place of pilgrimage in Kashmir has its own **Mahatamya**. The **Amarnath Mahatamya** gives an account of the route to the difficult mountain shrine, the smaller shrines and springs en-route where the devote was expected to offer worship etc., and the merit that accrued from the pilgrimage. Very thoughtfully the pilgrim was enjoined to have a holy dip in the sacred springs and streams en-route. At many of these he was also required to offer oblations to his deceased kith and kin.

According to the **Mahatamaya**. the Amarnath pilgrimage is fully accomplished only on paying a visit to Navdal a holy spot between Avantipore and Tral, and having a bath in the waters of the sacred springs there besides performance of a **shradha** to one's deceased kith and kin.

But now-a-days only some local devotees visit the place on return from Shri Amarnathji. And some of them do so not immediately on return but some weeks and even some months later. Navdal is about 4 kms from Avantipore (on the National Highway). Avantipore is about 30 kms from Srinagar. But the pilgrims wouldn't return to Srinagar and then go to Navdal ; they crossed over to the place over the Budmor bridge from Mamleshwar across the Lidder at Pahalgam. In this way they shortened their return journey, as it enabled them to skip Pahalgam proper, besides Mahagunus, Sheshnag, Chandanwari. Mattan and Anantnag.

Navdal was known for nine springs in whose combined waters the returning pilgrims were supposed to have a bath and offer **shradha** to one's deceased ancestors and kith and kin.

Offerings

Amarnath is a unique shrine in more ways than one. The offerings made by the devotees in the sacred cave are shared among the **mahant** of the Dashnami Akhara, Srinagar; the **pandas** (priests) of Mattan, and a Muslim family of Batakoot village below Pahalgam. The **mahant**-in-charge of the **Chhari** was required to lead the pilgrim procession and provide meals to the sadhus accompanying the **Charri**. This he continues to do with the assistance of the DHARMARTH and the sadhus residing at Barbarshah and in the Hanuman Mandir on the north-eastern flanks of the Hari Parbat hill in Srinagar, besides offering them accommodation in the city. The Mattan priests possibly assisted in the performance of worship and **shradhas** and the Maliks, whose ancestors were Hindus, were required to keep the route to the mountain shrine in good trim But while the **Mahant** continues to be responsible for providing shelter and food to the mendicant sadhus, the other two co-sharers of the offerings have little to contribute now to the pilgrimage; the maintenance of the route to the renowned shrine having been taken over by the State Public Works Department And now that the worth and volume of the offerings is fast going up, it is a matter for serious consideration if the offerings or, at least, a part of them, should not be utilised for the benefit of those making the pilgrimage. The pilgrims could, for instance, be provided an insurance cover.

Useful Tips

As the journey is mountainous and rough, the pilgrims need the assistance of riding or pack ponies and labourers or coolies. The old and the infirm may need **dandies** also. (A dandi is a kind of palanquin carried on their shoulders by four **coolies** at a time). They are available at Pahalgam at fixed rates. Arrangements are made by the Government for providing provisions, fire-wood, kerosene, etc. to the pilgrims at various stages of the journey. A medical unit is also placed on duty to render medical aid at Chandan-wari, Wavjan, Mahagunus, Panchtarni and the holy cave, besides certain other points on the route.

A number of non-official organisations, notably the DHARMARTH, a **charitable trust** set up by the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir for the upkeep and maintenance of temples and shrines in the State, also render invaluable assistance of various kinds to the pilgrims. The DHARMARTH TRUST, of which Dr. Karan Singh is now the Sole Trustee, sets up a number of tents for the facility of the visiting sadhus and provides them, as also some others in need, woollen blankets, firewood etc. In early Dogra times the sadhus were provided free rations, some cash and a little **charas**, by the State. But with the rapid increase in their numbers, this is no longer feasible. Now-a-days the responsibility of providing food and shelter to the sadhus is of Dashnami Akhara Srinagar.

In view of the severe cold in cloudy and in-clement weather, the intending pilgrims need to equip themselves with heavy woollens, raincoats, umbrellas, water-proof shoes, walking sticks, sun-glasses, match boxes. lanterns, torches and cigarettes (for those in thral to Lady Nicotine). A knife and torch are a must, so also rubber shoes.

Some tea, instant coffee and little powdered milk are also useful. A camera and binoculars add to the joy of the trek.

The State Department of Tourism gets a number of tents put up at various stages of the mountain route by private camping agencies. Accommodation in these is allotted in advance by the Assistant Director Tourism, Pahalgam, on payment But the vast majority of the pilgrims have to put up in tents hired by themselves for the purpose at Pahalgam.

A number of **dhabas** and small wayside tea shops spring up at Chandanwari, Wavjan and Panchtarni where pilgrims can have tea, coffee and snacks, but the yatris will be well advised to be fully equipped in this regard on their own also. So also in regard to food stuff, though it may be mentioned here again that depots for supply of **rice, atta**, kerosene etc. are set up at various stages by the State authorities. Above all the **yatris** should have at their disposal enough money to defray the cost of the week-long trek, in which a pack and a riding pony costs more than Rs. 300/- each and a coolie or labourer over Rs 150/-. A **dandi** costs from Rs 1,700 to Rs. 1,900. But the costs go up ever year.

The intending pilgrims are advised to intimate their requirements to the Assistant Director Tourism, Pahalgam, about a week or ten days before the commencement of the journey. Particulars about the pilgrimage can be had from the Kashmir Government Tourist offices at Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Pathankote, Jammu and Srinagar.

Those intending to make the pilgrimage are advised to get themselves medically examined to

ensure that they are fit to undertake this uphill journey which carries them to a height of over 4,200 metres. Small children and the old and infirm should not risk the tough mountain journey involving a steep ascent to a high mountain pass, and walking over frozen snow at places.

Pilgrims are warned against entrusting their belongings to unauthorised persons, either at Pahalgam or other stages of the trek, and especially at the holy cave when they move into it for worship. Arrangements for keeping these in safe custody at Pahalgam are made by the State Government; elsewhere one has to depend on one's pony-men. Care should, however, be taken to ensure that the pony-men do not lag far behind. They should be asked to move with oneself. Also, it is advisable to cover the day's journey in morning hours so that one has enough time for rest and to prepare one's meal etc. This also spares one the tedium of walking in the sun which is apt to be very hot on mountains.

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Om Namah Shivai !
Om Namah Shivai !

Author